

Examining Experiential Learning and Implications for Organizations

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The scholarly literature on experiential learning has soared since the 1980s, yet evidence-based data on its use and practice in organizations remain limited. The goal of this study was to fill the research void by examining empirical graduate-level research using a bounded qualitative meta-synthesis framework. Forty documents were retrieved by an unlimited date search of the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT) Global™ digital database using the terms “experiential learning” AND “management” to answer the overarching research question: What can we learn by examining doctoral dissertations and master’s theses on experiential learning in the context of organizations between 1991 and 2015? Analysis of the coded data revealed three central themes: (a) learning from experience, (b) experiential learning interventions, and (c) experiential learning outputs. An integrative framework highlights the significance of experiential learning for organizations from a human resource development perspective. Practical implications are offered around individual competencies, learning processes, and learning outputs.

Key Words: experiential learning programmes, organizations, reflection, action research, leadership development, performance improvement

Introduction

Experiential learning, simply defined as the process of learning by doing (Kolb, 1984), has continued to gain broad acceptance and respect in a wide range of situations over the last several decades. As experiential learning has become more prevalent, a field of related scholarship has also evolved (Illeris, 2007; Lewis & Williams, 1994; Moore, 2010). Despite the history and breadth of the experiential learning literature (Dewey, 1934; Kolb, 1984; Seaman et al., 2017), particularly in the context of education, evidence-based data on its use and practice within organizations remain limited (Gitsham, 2011; Holmqvist, 2004; Larsen, 2004). Moreover, to the author’s knowledge, studies reporting results of graduate-level research examining experiential learning in the context of organizations are nonexistent. While it is recognized that doctoral dissertations and master’s theses produce empirical results and are generally considered worthy contributions, their works are seldom disseminated through peer-reviewed journal publications (Park & Timmons, 2008). The oversight by graduates to report original research diminishes opportunities to contribute new knowledge, inform practice and policy, and help advance a field (Maynard et al., 2012; Rocco & Hatcher, 2011).

To draw on the untapped potential of such contributions and thereby address the gap in the literature, this paper begins by briefly reviewing experiential learning. Second, it examines 40 dissertations on experiential learning by using a bounded qualitative meta-synthesis framework to answer the overarching research question: What can we learn by examining doctoral dissertations and master’s theses on experiential learning in the context of organizations between 1991 and 2015? Third, the paper describes three emergent themes: (a) competency development,

(b) experiential learning interventions, and (c) learning outputs, revealing how empirical, graduate-level research might add to our understanding of experiential learning. These findings are based on input from a range of newly hired and experienced professionals — team members, managers, senior executives, fire chiefs, medical officers, and human resource development (HRD) practitioners, who represent several types of organizations located in different countries — see Appendix for an overview of the dissertations’ degree granting institutions, methodology, and brief abstracts. An integrative framework highlighting the findings illustrates experiential learning as a learner-centered process within the organization. Fourth, it articulates the significance of experiential learning for organizations by offering actionable interpretations to HRD scholars and practitioners, OD consultants, management professionals, trainers, and others interested in learning and development. Last, final remarks underscoring the powerful potential of experiential learning for organizations are provided.

Experiential Learning

Experiential approaches to learning have received substantial attention from scholars since the latter half of the twentieth century. The essence of experience originated in part from John Dewey’s (1934) work: “Those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being ‘real experience’ ... It may have been something of tremendous importance ... or it may have been something that in comparison was slight” (p. 205). In 1946 Kurt Lewin and associates pioneered action research as a new form of collaboration between researchers and community leaders that involved a two-week workshop to help improve civic policy (Seaman et al., 2017). David Kolb’s 1984 book proposed an experiential learning theory (ELT), which was inspired by the Lewinian Experiential Learning Model of creating and recreating knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Learning as an emergent process is also consistent with Jean Piaget’s description of cognitive development (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). ELT is identified as a holistic approach to learning, which follows an active and adaptive process. Through this process, individuals construct knowledge by transforming experience through perception, cognition, and behavior (Kolb, 1984). Recognizing the critical nature of experience, Kolb (1984) posited “Learning, the creation of knowledge and meaning, occurs through the active extension and grounding of ideas and experiences in the external world and through internal reflection about the attributes of these experiences and ideas” (p. 52). Reflective practice moves beyond alternative human actions that yield a similar result (i.e., single-loop learning) to recreation of social structures in light of the appropriateness of the intended result (i.e., double-loop learning) (Greenwood, 1998). Today, experiential learning practice is widespread and proponents continue to introduce its various forms to diverse professions.

Different forms of learning with an embedded experiential component include action learning (Yeo & Marquardt, 2015; Yorks et al., 1999), action research (Maurer & Githens, 2010), and corporate adventure training (CAT) programmes (Gass et al., 1992). Although workplaces take advantage of experiential learning with the goal of increasing individual, group, and organizational performance, there remains a dearth of related evidence-based data reported in the literature to help inform practice and further research beyond that of theoretical papers and a few case examples (Matsuo 2015; Pless et al., 2011). Searching reports on completed graduate research provides a viable alternative to peer-reviewed journal publications, especially if one considers the numbers of postsecondary degrees conferred continue to rise. According to The Condition of Education 2017 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, for example,

the number of doctoral degrees awarded between 1994-95 and 2004-05 increased by 17.6%, from 114,266 to 134,387 (McFarland et al., 2017). Moreover, the number of doctoral degrees awarded between 2004-05 and 2014-15 jumped by 32.9% to 178,547 (McFarland et al., 2017). Graduate degrees typically culminate in a capstone experience and for a doctoral degree, most research is prepared as dissertations and reviewed by committees.

Methods

A bounded qualitative framework guided this study on graduate-level research around experiential learning in the context of organizations. The approach was initially employed by Banning and Kuk (2009) to explore student affairs organizations and has since been utilized by other researchers in a variety of contexts.

Sampling and data collection

A data set originated from the ProQuest Dissertations & Theses (PQDT) Global™ digital database by querying subject headings using the search terms “experiential learning” AND “management”. Adding the latter term effectively screened for experiential learning studies situated in an organization context. The unlimited date search yielded 68 English records between 1991 and 2016; one duplicate was eliminated and four records published in 2016 were omitted. Excluding the four records that were published during the same year the search was carried out ensured the final data set accounted for all completed works submitted to the ProQuest’s UMI Dissertations Publishing group through to 2015. Scanning the records for relevancy narrowed the data set to 36 doctoral dissertations and four master’s theses (collectively referred to as dissertations hereafter). The study was thus bounded by (a) a category–experiential learning framed within an organizational context, and (b) a twenty-five-year period between 1991 and 2015. Bibliographical data, abstracts, and complete records in PDF format were subsequently exchanged from EndNote™ to NVivo™ software for data analysis.

Data analysis

Full-text dissertations were examined. Qualitative document analysis (QDA) as an emergent methodology framed this study (Altheide et al., 2008). Template analysis helped to organize and analyze the textual data (King, 2004). This set of coding techniques utilized a list of theme-categories (i.e., template), some of which were defined a priori while others were induced. Inductive codes emerged using the constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Different strategies were considered to protect this study’s trustworthiness. Bowen (2009) cited several advantages to using documents including, but not limited to, lack of obtrusiveness and reactivity, stability, and exactness.

Findings

This section is initially organized by three central themes discovered in the data (see Table 1): (a) learning from experience, (b) experiential learning interventions, and (c) experiential learning outputs. Each theme is discussed, drawing on examples from the reviewed dissertations. It ends by synthesizing the themes on experiential learning using an integrative framework that was

drawn from the data from a systems theory perspective. An Appendix that is organized by themes outlines the 40 dissertations by providing the degree granting institutions, methodology, and brief abstracts. All references cited in this section of the article are drawn from the said Appendix.

Three Central Themes Derived from the Data			
Category	Learning from Experience	Experiential Learning: Interventions	Experiential Learning: Outputs
1	Developing Competencies	Prior to Transitioning to Workplace	Leadership Competencies
2	Reflecting Critically on Events	After Transitioning to Workplace	Decision-Making

Table 1: Emergent Themes and Categories from Published Dissertations

Learning from experience

Commonalities among the data from the dissertations and specific to developmental experiences were induced into two categories:

1. Learning from Experience — Developing Competencies
2. Learning from Experience — Reflecting Critically on Key Events

Developing competencies was dependent on context. In a phenomenological study, Sherlock (2000) defined professional context as the personal and sociocultural factors surrounding one's position in an organization. He found a politically-charged environment where power imbalances existed, for instance, hindered what and how chief executive officers of nonprofit associations learned. Smith (2000) confirmed organizational and social contexts were integral to learning to think differently; that is, a safe (internal) environment where people were permitted to experience failure and could learn from one another cultivated a culture that supported change. In a study using a quasi-experimental, multiple time-series design involving graduates of a ten-month, in-residence professional military education programme, Thompson (2003) reported significant positive relationships between level of on-the-job challenge and self-reported changes in leadership behavior and characteristics. He concluded a climate conducive towards learning or other forms of support, such as mentoring, was required for translating on-the-job challenges into leadership growth. Similarly, in a qualitative multiple case study, Jones (2007) found hardship and challenging on-the-job experiences resulted in personal learning and adaptability to change. He also suggested fire chiefs be given a safe external environment to learn and practice political skills. Finally, Terrell (2010) revealed cross-cultural, lived experiences overseeing others in multiple countries were critical in developing global leadership competencies, such as the value of cultural sensitivity and an improved curiosity to learn.

Reflecting critically on key events, such as stretch goals, adverse experiences, and projects having high stakes, positively influenced participants' development (Demare, 2014). Global information technology project managers felt these challenges increased their capability to manage the volume and intensity of their work. According to chief medical officers, business mistakes while trying to initiate change represented growth opportunities in personal and interpersonal leadership skills and values (Nowill, 2009). Last, based on interviews with 19 human resource leaders in a grounded theory study, early childhood experiences and contexts had a persisting

influence on the development, nurture, and exhibition of leader competencies (Wilson, 2006). Reflection was one mechanism among others noted as having a possible connection to double-loop learning (Ng, 2011).

Experiential learning interventions

Commonalities among the data from the dissertations yielded two distinct periods along the career pathway where experiential learning interventions influenced performance: prior to transitioning to the workplace (e.g., co-operative learning, interning) and after transitioning to the workplace (e.g., learning to learn, action research, collaborative learning, and community service):

1. EL Interventions — Exposure Prior to Transitioning to the Workplace
2. EL Interventions — Exposure After Transitioning to the Workplace

Professionals participating in a few of the research studies were alumni who had been previously exposed to different forms of experiential learning interventions while students. These studies offered unique insights into the impact of experiential learning on early career outcomes. For example, Dickerson (2007) found alumni from one of three hospitality management undergraduate programmes using a cooperative learning model with the greatest structure in support of experiential learning exhibited higher preparedness ratings, higher job satisfaction ratings, and higher starting and current salaries than two comparative models. Structure included integration of academic assignments with work experience, reflective components, programme monitoring, academic credit, and transcript recognition. Furthermore, this same model with the greatest experiential commitment, whereby students not only attended class but did so in conjunction with employment, resulted in the greatest job and industry retention. To the contrary, statistically significant results indicated alumni from the model having the least structure were more apt to leave the industry. Dickerson (2007) surmised a decreased understanding of the realities of industry workplaces resulted in career dissatisfaction, which prompted the turnover.

With respect to exposure of experiential learning after joining an organization, a breadth of additional types of interventions were similarly analyzed. In one particular quantitative study, participants were adult volunteers for a philanthropic service organization. Using a pretest–posttest survey design, Crawford-Mathis (2009) demonstrated an international service learning programme significantly increased the volunteers’ capacities to adjust to the new culture in Belize based on the amount of time spent interacting with the local citizenry and sharing a meal, shopping in the market, and teaching. Findings from the study confirmed culture intelligence is a malleable capability, dependent on cultural exposure, experiential role playing, socialization, as well as possibly other experiences. In a separate qualitative case study, participants were attendees of an export assistance programme for leaders of small-to-medium-sized enterprises. Through interviews, Jackson (2008) showed action learning benefited participants in their training and development about doing business in Mexico. Conducting business abroad took the form of trade missions, visits to select businesses, and field trips, all of which increased participants’ confidence in their own abilities. Debriefings and reflection of participants’ experiences helped them internalize new knowledge and learn from others’ experiences.

Peer-to-peer gatherings offer stakeholders from different communities an avenue to exchange information and experiences surrounding common challenges and solutions. An example of

this type of collaborative learning was a fisher learning exchange (FLE) among fishermen, non-governmental organizations, and government agencies for the diffusion and adoption of management strategies concerning fishing. Thompson (2015) carried out a multiple case study to examine characteristics of successful FLEs; she found a clear purpose and flexible objectives; careful selection of members with diverse professions; mixed activities, from presentations to site visits to local fisheries; and follow-up support in terms of logistics and finances were key drivers for success.

In a more traditional organizational setting like a manufacturing plant, for instance, a training intervention in learning to learn was piloted. Matuszak's (1991) qualitative case study involved newly hired technicians, who were responsible for planning and evaluating workplace learning projects, and their supervisor. The outcomes of the intervention were reported, noting the following topics and experiential learning activities, in particular: learning style profiling and interpretation of results, project planning and evaluation, learning resource and strategy selection procedures, and reflection on problem-solving strategies.

Experiential learning outputs

Experiential learning outputs from intervention activities, broadly speaking, fell into two categories:

1. Experiential Learning Outputs — Leadership Competencies
2. Experiential Learning Outputs — Decision-Making

The initial emphasis pertaining to leadership competencies is described using two examples. First, Jones (2015) compared accountants enrolled in a leadership development programme to a control group without training using a replicated pretest–posttest survey design and found leadership experience influenced the results of formal training. Accumulated time allowed for more mental schemas to develop, which helped leaders having greater experience leading tax projects and audits utilize training but left novice leaders unable to glean insights. However, while more projects covering a breadth of situations helped seasoned leaders form beneficial mental schemas, leading for longer periods of time placed a ceiling constraint on their willingness to learn from additional formal training. Second, Gillis (2011) collected survey data from 177 global leadership development practitioners, such as a Chairman, Chief Learning Officer, and Human Resource Strategist, of U.S.-based international, multinational, and global companies. Gillis (2011) suggested competencies of domestic and global leaders are similar although some for global leaders are more critical and predominate: networking skills (via global teams), self-regulation (through reflection and via coaching), knowledge (via expatriate assignments), self-awareness (through reflection via assessments), and social judgment skills (via experiential learning). He also concluded the learning and development method and associated budget prioritization were dependent on the global leadership competency to be developed.

The second area focused on decision-making, which is illustrated with two examples. In the first example using a qualitative case study, Braithwaite (2014) showed ethical decision-making of seasoned emergency response paramedics was facilitated through experiential learning in emergent situations involving communities of practice with peers and mentors as opposed to formal classroom teaching. Findings confirmed critical reflection about ethical dilemmas was an

essential ingredient of navigating the decision-making process. For the second illustration using narrative inquiry, though, whilst experiential learning was perceived as being more valuable than formal learning it was inefficient insofar as implementing strategy (Hinchcliffe, 1999). The approach to strategic decision-making was transformed from instinctive to systematic through organizational learning.

Integrative experiential learning framework

Adopting systems theory, the three emergent themes on experiential learning within an organizational context were synthesized from an input-process-output perspective (see Figure 1): (a) learning from experience at the individual level; (b) experiential learning interventions at the process level; and (c) experiential learning outputs from intervention activities, which impacted performance at levels of the individual, group, and organization.

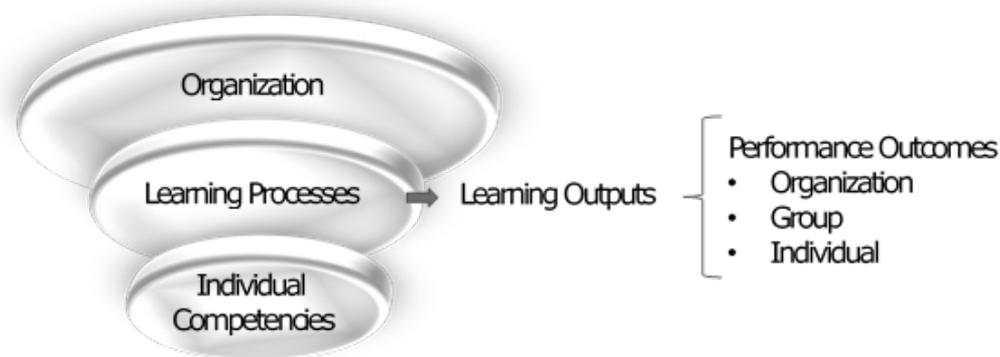


Figure 1: Integrative experiential learning framework.

This figure illustrates experiential learning from an input-process-output perspective.

Learning processes, aligned with programme goals, produced outputs. Common elements to successful interventions gleaned from the data included: (a) a safe environment for practicing (conflict management) skills and encouraging ongoing learning and continuous development (Clark, 2008; Clarke, 2003; Davalovsky, 2003; Smith, 2000); (b) a structure that provides dedicated time, tools, and language for the work (Clarke, 2003; Ng, 2011); (c) facilitative processes, such as ground rules and inclusivity (Clark, 2008); (d) a facilitator to help lead the way (Ng, 2011); and (e) flexibility in objectives and delivery of the training, careful selection of participants, and follow-up support after an event or activity, including information dissemination about lessons learned and next steps (Thompson, 2015);

Individual learning outputs resulted in new knowledge, skills, and abilities (e.g., problem-solving and decision-making) (Braithwaite, 2014; Ghaffarzadegan, 2011; Hinchcliffe, 1999; Yates, 2011). Examples of group-level outputs were interpersonal skills and communication skills, as individuals also learned from socially constructed experiences (Gillis, 2011). Archival production records showed individual- or group-level performance was positively associated with goal difficulty but not necessarily with repetitive goal usage (experience), although the latter finding was attributed to statistical difficulties in analyses (Graham, 2012). Structural equation modeling established project performance was directly influenced by firm-level experiential

knowledge and process-based (team) creativity and was indirectly influenced by team-level experiential knowledge (Suh, 2004). At the organizational level, quantitative depth of experience influenced performance in some models and qualitative breadth of experience mattered in other cases (Mannor, 2008). These mixed results stressed the importance of discriminating between depth and/or breadth in selecting experiential learning approaches best suited to achieve an organization's performance goals.

In summary, individuals transform experiences through organizational learning processes to enhance competencies and business practices, which optimally translate to improved performance outcomes at the individual, group, and/or organization levels. The next section sheds further light on the different experiential learning approaches and their impacts depending on specific aims, contexts, and support mechanisms.

Discussion and Implications to HRD Research and Practice

This study uniquely contributes to the HRD literature on experiential learning to help fill a void by answering the overarching research question about what we can learn from doctoral dissertation and master's theses between 1991 and 2015 that is of interest to organizations. Leveraging the study's findings of graduate-level research three central themes emerged from the data: (a) learning from experience, (b) experiential learning interventions, and (c) experiential learning outputs. Each of these three themes are developed using practical examples from the analysis. An integrative framework constructed from the data also synthesized results. The following discussion highlights the importance of experiential learning for organizations, future directions for research, and concluding thoughts.

Implications for practice

Implications for practice concerning experiential learning in organizations are organized into three main areas that involve HRD (see Table 2): (a) competencies of the individual learner, (b) learning processes, and (c) learning outputs. Discussion that ensues is not intended to capture every topic revealed by the data but rather stimulate thoughts and offer salient, actionable interpretations for management, HRD professionals, OD practitioners, and others having an interest in learning and professional development for performance improvement.

Individual competencies. The findings point to practical implications concerning individual competencies. While employees are supposed to be self-initiated in their learning, organizations can also benefit by helping them learn from their experiences. "Employees create value for the organization by committing their knowledge to perform work and develop innovative solutions, ultimately for mission attainment" (Jackson, 2011, p. 34). Organizations have an obligation to make work not only meaningful but also provide individuals with the kinds of stimuli they will likely need for sustained personal success (Alan, 2006; Davalovsky, 2003; Nicely, 2009; Wilson, 2006). As such, there are steps organizations may take towards facilitating their employees' professional growth and development.

A few examples include incorporating developmental experiences, especially for high potentials and those expressing a desire to improve their leadership skills (Navaratnam, 2014; Nowill, 2009; Terrell, 2010); inserting opportunities to learn political skills in a safe and supportive

external environment (Jones, 2007; Sherlock, 2000); and increasing individuals' abilities for meaning making and self-complexity (Akrivou, 2008; Wilson, 2006). Demare (2014) and Jones (2007) discuss placing individuals in challenging (stretch) assignments before they are 100% ready to enhance their performance. Organizations may consider organizing mission-focused community-based activities to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and foster ethical decision-making (Braithwaite, 2014; Jackson, 2011). Clarke (2003) considers experiential learning to raise team members' awareness about managing conflict and help resolve problems. The last recommendation involves mixing international project teams with varying degrees of experience and cultural intelligence, such that experienced members can be performance-driven while inexperienced members can focus on learning (Crawford-Mathis, 2009; Suh, 2004). However, Suh (2004) suggests choosing individuals possessing high levels of cultural intelligence for shorter assignments unless the stay is part of an overall plan intended to elicit developmental experiences.

Findings	Implications	Significance to Organizations
Learning from Experiences	Individual Competencies	Developmental experiences: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stimulate learners' experiences • Promote thinking differently and systematically • Encourage active self-development • Instill a growth mindset • Incorporate challenging job assignments • Develop skills in political and ethical domains • Consider global competencies among the others
EL Interventions	Learning Processes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Characteristics • Structural Supports • Exposure (as indicator of career success) 	EL programmes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support, maintain, and invest in learning processes • Nurture a culture supportive of learning • Establish goals and set expectations in beginning • Align strategic objectives, core capabilities, and needs • Ensure flexible objectives and delivery of intervention • Define a manageable list of target competencies • Align competencies to job function and context • Enable mechanisms so learners present authentic self • Provide structure to support on-the-job challenges • Afford protected time to ensure goal achievement • Enhance reflective practices at work • Cast safety nets in support of failure • Offer safe environments to learn (internal and external)
EL Outputs	Learning Outputs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translational • Success Factors 	Facilitate learning transfer via reflective practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ease adaptation of behaviors with mentors/coaches • Bolster group interaction and knowledge sharing • Assimilate new ind'l knowledge into org'l knowledge • Surface and manage team conflicts expeditiously • Use evaluation to monitor progress

Table 2: Significance to Organizations by Emergent Themes

Learning processes: Characteristics, structural supports, and exposure. The findings confirm a variety of internal and external factors exist that can either facilitate or impede knowledge

creation. Recommendations are offered to enhance learning processes, generally, and leadership development programmes, specifically. The significance of developmental experiences is raised as well.

Experience within the learning process may be centered by making use of scenario-based training, case study presentations, and simulation (Braithwaite, 2014). As regards ethics training, in particular, she highlights incorporating individual values, community-based ideals, and empathy. Sherlock (2000) and Yeganeh (2007) recommend embedding stimulating, albeit practical, experiences that are contextually meaningful; Demare (2014) adds, these experiences where possible should directly support on-the-job challenges and foster developmental relationships. Navaratnam (2014) advocates best practices to accommodate changing work environments, workplace composition, and new technologies. Others recommend the use of skilled and experienced facilitators, mentors, and coaches to maximize learning from hardship and challenging job assignments (Navaratnam, 2014; Ng, 2011; Nowill, 2009). Careful design and evaluation of learning development programmes are critical for gauging the progress from beginning to end (Matuszak, 1991; Ng, 2011).

As regards leadership development programmes, several researchers clearly stress the importance of enhancing (global) leaders' and CEOs' reflective practices of their current work, in general, as well as their past life experiences (Davalovsky, 2003; Dickerson, 2007; Gillis, 2011; Sherlock, 2000; Yates, 2011). Reflection helps an individual internalize his/her new knowledge and learning, which may also alleviate fear (Jackson, 2008). For executive and management programmes, Sloan (2004) suggests structuring coaching interventions around raising one's basic tendencies to a level of awareness so that inefficiencies based on personality traits and unwanted learned behaviors can be offset. Similarly, it may be a good idea for global leadership development programmes to take a global leader's predisposition in attitudes and behaviors into account since different competencies become more critical outside one's local context (Gillis, 2011; Terrell, 2010).

Last, results on the importance of early exposure to EL lend insights for managing human capital. Asked to reflect back on developmental experiences from their childhood or time in an education programme, data from adult participants (leaders) confirm elements of culminating hands-on learning serve as positive career success indicators (Dickerson, 2007; Jeurgens, 2012; Jones, 2007; Richmond, 2013; Thompson, 2003). As such, organizations might identify job candidates or high-potentials with diverse portfolios of experiences like internships, cooperative assignments, or extracurricular activities to help satisfy their talent pool strategy.

Learning outputs: Translational success indicators. The findings illustrate the importance of transferring learning back into the workplace in order for organizations to reap practical benefits of creating knowledge. Jackson (2011) suggested integrating experiential learning principles into company sponsored activities to translate previously acquired business knowledge (tacit knowledge) to enhanced competency areas (explicit knowledge). Reflection, though unequivocally emphasized throughout the extant literature for its pivotal role in the learning process, remains the most underrepresented part of the cycle in organizations (Clarke, 2003).

Future directions for research

Graduate-level research on experiential learning in the context of organizations initially surfaced in the PQDT database in 1991 following the publication of Kolb's seminal book (1984). Although

graduate work in this area is trending upwards, appearing each successive year after 2002, the production level is still disappointing. This plus the paucity of related peer-reviewed journal publications, generally, leave ample space for future research. In particular, researchers could compare and contrast the many forms of experiential learning and explore its varied applications. Ultimately, researchers might investigate its impacts on performance at different levels of analysis and learn how the various approaches can best contribute to organizations.

Conclusion

Despite the obvious significance of graduate-level research, contributions from dissertations are largely overlooked as sources of new knowledge. This study is the first to contribute evidence-based data on the benefits of experiential learning in the context of organizations to the HRD literature. Findings from the examination of 40 dissertations confirm experiential learning in its variety of forms deserves greater attention and resources. Experiential learning programmes benefit employees through enhanced professional development and growth, which positively influence job satisfaction and retention; support and help sustain a learning culture via optimized processes; and enable organizations to adapt to change. A learning culture tolerates failure and dedicates time and a safe environment for reflection so that learning can be transferred back to the workplace. Its effective implementation requires careful planning at the appropriate performance levels, customization, execution, and follow up to yield positive results; however, the effort need only involve embedding EL elements into existing routines rather than initiating new, large-scale programmes. It is important to move beyond rhetoric to integrate experiential learning into organizations, evaluate results, and disseminate findings.

Appendix

1. Central Theme One: Learning from Experience					
Source & Degree	Degree Granting Institution	Study Design & Data Collection	Population & Setting	Sample Size	Brief Abstract
Demare (2014) Ed.D.	Univ. of Pennsylvania (US)	Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews / Critical Incident Technique	Incidents recounted by 19 global IT project managers	64	Examined competency development through on-the-job experiences.
Jones (2007) Ph.D.	Colorado State Univ. (US)	Qualitative Multiple-Case Study	Fire chiefs who had 20+ years of progressive leadership	14	Examined specific experiences that produced change in leadership and management behaviors (i.e., developmental experiences).
Nowill (2009) Ph.D.	Fielding Graduate Univ. (US)	Qualitative Telephone Interviews	Chief medical officers	10	Examined the key developmental job experiences and the lessons learned that had the greatest impact on improving leadership ability.
Politis (2005) Ph.D.	Lunds Universitet (Sweden)	Collection of Studies Interviews & Surveys	Swedish entrepreneurs	291	Developed concepts that enhanced understanding of entrepreneurship as an experiential learning process and tested a conceptual framework that explained how individuals develop entrepreneurial knowledge through experiences acquired in their careers.
Sherlock (2000) Ed.D.	The George Washington Univ. (US)	Qualitative Phenomenology ~3,000 pages of interview data	Chief Executive Officers of nonprofit associations	12	Explored learning experiences in a professional context (i.e., the personal and sociocultural factors surrounding one's position).
Smith (2000) Ph.D.	Portland State Univ. (US)	Experiment Pre-Post Tests / Qualitative Interviews	Manufacturing organization [62 students (31 per condition) and 17 managers]	79	A. Tested whether computer-based simulation technology was more effective than a traditional classroom lecture-based instruction in learning how to think more systemically. B. Examined how experience provided learning opportunities that help people develop and sustain more systemic thinking.

Terrell (2010) Ed.D.	The George Washington Univ. (US)	Qualitative Phenomenology	Senior-level leaders in 6 global companies	12	Explored the developmental experiences of global leaders in order to understand what they learned and how they learned and developed their competencies, motives, and mindsets.
Thompson (2003) Ed.D.	The George Washington Univ. (US)	Quantitative Quasi-Experimental, Multiple Time-Series Design	Alumni of a professional military education program (5 cohorts)	579	Examined the relationship between exposure to on-the-job developmental opportunities inherent in jobs and self-perceived changes in leadership behavior and characteristics.
Wilson (2006) D.M.	Univ. of Phoenix(US)	Blended Grounded Theory Interviews	HR mid- to senior-level professional & other business leaders	19	Described how personal and professional life experiences influenced the development of leader competencies.

2. Central Theme Two: Experiential Learning Interventions

Cilliers (2000) Ph.D.	Univ. of Pretoria (South Africa)	Qualitative Action Research	Dis-advantaged employees in an industrial context	Unk	Reported on the development of an experiential learning process to help in developing employees' competencies.
Clark (2008) Ph.D.	Antioch Univ. (US)	Qualitative Case Study	Members of a management / leadership team	8	Analyzed an example of action learning around an organization's efforts to change from autocratic leadership to a more collaborative working environment.
Clarke (2003) M.A.	Univ. of Toronto (Canada)	Qualitative Approach of Ethnomethodology / In-Depth Case Study	Core team members, including 1 leader, plus 2 others	6	Explored how an experiential learning program can affect the ability of a work team to effectively manage conflict.
Crawford-Mathis (2009) Ph.D.	Capella Univ. (US)	Longitudinal Quantitative Mixed-Mode Survey	Adult volunteers participating in projects in Belize	226	Explored the relationship between cultural intelligence, the capacity to adjust to a new culture, and self-monitoring personality, the ability to control or modify self-presentation.
Dickerson (2007) Ed.D.	Wilmington College (Delaware, US)	Cross-Sectional, Comparative Study Mailed Surveys	Early career alumni from B.S. hospitality mgmt. programs	155	Compared the early professional outcomes of alumni from 3 experiential learning models in post-secondary education.

Jack (2011) Ph.D.	Western Michigan Univ. (US)	Quantitative Online Survey	Hospitality and Tourism Management [122 undergraduate students, 39 faculty, & 98 professionals]	259	Examined the perceptions of students and industry professionals as to the extent HTM undergraduate students actually develop key management competencies while participating in experiential learning components.
Jackson (2011) D.M.	Univ. of Maryland Univ. College (US)	Scholar-Practitioner Approach to Evidence-Based Research	Literature Review Public Sector	---	Examined the impact of experiential learning initiatives (community service projects) on the level of intellectual capital to actualize strategic philanthropic potential.
Jackson (2008) Ph.D.	Univ. of the Incarnate Word (US)	Qualitative Case Study	Graduates of the San Antonio Export Leaders Program for SMEs	10	Investigated action learning in the form of trade missions, visits to export businesses, and other field trips to train and develop attendees about doing business in another country.
Jeurgens (2012) D.B.A.	St. Ambrose Univ. (US)	Quantitative Online Survey	Early career MBA alumni working across industries	34	Examined how the perceived utility of experiential learning within a course at a nationally recognized MBA program affects graduates' transfer of training.
Matuszak (1991) Ed.D.	Northern Illinois Univ. (US)	Qualitative Case Study	Four newly hired technicians plus their supervisor in manufacturing plant	8	A training intervention in learning to learn in the workplace was designed, delivered, and evaluated; it's purpose was to increase newly hired employees' ability to plan and evaluate such workplace learning projects.
Ng (2011) Ph.D.	Univ. of Toronto (Canada)	Qualitative Multiple-Case Study of 8 Pilot Projects	Project leaders, nursing program managers, and direct care nurses	32	Explored how pilot projects (organizational experiments) affect organizational learning.
Richmond (2013) Ph.D.	Capella Univ. (US)	Qualitative Phenomenology	Under-represented business executives w/ ≥ 2 summer internships as undergraduates	15	Sought to understand the effect of ≥ 2 summer undergraduate internships (career advancement lived experiences) on alumni's career success.

Thompson (2015) Master's	Univ. of Washington (US)	Multiple Case Study	Organizers and participants of six successful FLEs	21	Examined the key characteristics of successful fisher learning exchanges (FLEs). FLEs are peer-to-peer gatherings in which fishery stakeholders from different communities freely exchange information and experiences surrounding fisheries challenges and solutions.
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3. Central Theme Three: Experiential Learning Outputs

Braithwaite (2014) Ed.D.	North Carolina State Univ. (US)	Qualitative Case Study	“Seasoned” emergency response paramedics	13	Sought to understand how practicing paramedics perceive ethics in patient care, specifically the process of navigating ethical decision-making in emergent situations.
Ghaffarzadegan (2011) Ph.D.	State Univ. of New York at Albany (US)	Three Essays & Simulation	Randomly selected obstetricians and related decision data, govt.	300	Examined behavioral decision-making phenomena in the contexts of public management and policy analysis.
Gillis (2011) Ed.D.	Univ. of Pennsylvania (US)	Quantitative Online Survey	Global leadership development practitioners	177	Analyzed talent management, company types and job functions, personality traits and competencies, and learning and development.
Graham (2012) D.B.A.	St. Ambrose Univ. (US)	Quantitative Observations	Archival production records / manufacturing	774	Tested hypotheses for effects of goal difficulty and past experience as well as their interaction on current performance.
Hinchcliffe (1999) Ph.D.	Temple Univ. (US)	Qualitative Narrative Inquiry	Line staff, mid-managers, & executives in one company	14	Described the organizational learning culture in terms of formal and experiential organizational learning, factors fostering it, perceptions about it, and its effects on strategic decision-making.
Jones (2015) Ph.D.	Univ. of Minnesota (US)	Quasi-Experimental Online Surveys	Project leaders, subordinates, and managers in public accounting	131	Compared trained leaders to similar non-trained leaders to explain why leadership experience in terms of duration and exposure helps or hinders the effectiveness of leadership training.

Mannor (2008) Ph.D.	Michigan State Univ. (US)	Three Essays	Varied [e.g., 559 films for Essay 3]	Varied	Examined how organizations learn from different types of experience to create new knowledge and achieve superior performance.
Navaratnam (2014) M.A.	Adler School of Professional Psychology (US)	Systematic Review [1,706 initial sources, reduced to 40]	Potential scholarly and practitioner sources on high-potential leaders.	40	Analyzed scholarly and practitioner literature to summarize perceived best practices in training and developing high-potential leaders.
Nicely (2009) Ph.D.	Oklahoma State Univ. (US)	Mixed Methods	Hotel managers	154	Examined the impact of engagement in learning activities prior to and during employment on self-reported management work-related learning.
Suh (2004) Ph.D.	Saint Louis Univ. (US)	Structural Equation Modeling	Korean finance execs of multinat'l corporation in manufacturing	156	Tested relationships between experiential knowledge, creativity, and consequential performance in context of international projects.
Yates (2011) Ed.D.	Columbia Univ. (US)	Multiple Methods Case Study Approach	Radiology technologists employed at six hospital worksites	22	Sought to understand specific learning practices leading to the development of professional expertise, reflective judgment, and workplace culture that support complex problem solving.

4. Experiential Learning (General and/or Multiple Topics)

Akrivou (2008) Ph.D.	Case Western Reserve Univ. (US)	Quantitative Web-Based Survey	Mid-senior managers in global/complex industries	198	Explored the relationship between self-integration, self-complexity, and integrative learning.
Alan (2006) Ed.D.	The George Washington Univ. (US)	Qualitative Interviews	Managers (graduates) from a leadership development program	8	Explored knowledge sharing through the learning styles of Experiential Learning Theory.
Barros (2002) Ph.D.	Case Western Reserve Univ. (US)	Qualitative Phenomenology	Members of two organizations	28	Sought to understand three dimensions of the experience of wholeness.
Davalovsky (2003) M.A.	Royal Roads Univ. (Canada)	Qualitative Action Research	Public health managers undergoing a restructure	7	Explored how the implementation of a reflective practice process enhances managerial learning.

Hitchcock (2012) D.B.A.	Capella Univ. (US)	Qualitative Semi- Structured Deep Interviews using Critical Realism	Executives (business leaders / practitioners)	10	Developed a referential framework from the language of executive experiences about higher level capability development for comparison to dynamic capabilities and Bloom's (1956/1984) Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.
Sloan (2004) Ed.D.	The George Washington Univ. (US)	Quantitative Study 2 Mailed Inventories	Professionals, managers and executives	93	Investigated whether particular personality traits or combinations of traits act to either help or hinder the acquisition of tacit knowledge, which in turn has bearing on managerial performance.
Yeganeh (2007) Ph.D.	Case Western Reserve Univ. (US)	Quantitative Online Surveys	Employed adults in various fields (completed all assessments)	243	Explored the relationship between mindfulness and experiential learning and aimed to clarify whether or not mindful experiential learning is a metacognitive or sensory/ contextual process.

Note. B.S. = Bachelor of Science degree; FLE = fisher learning exchange (defined above);
HR = Human Resources; IT = Information Technology; MBA = Master of Science in Business
Administration degree; SMEs = small-to-medium-sized enterprises; Unk = Unknown.

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